



THE GEORGETOWN

COMPANION

TO INTERRELIGIOUS

STUDIES

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Editor

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Ideal and Reality

An Interreligious Reading of the Gospel of John and the *Mengzi*

Bin Song

If we define “being religious” as any proclivity for integrating details of one’s everyday life as a whole, then religious people are presumably in constant need of reflecting upon how to walk on a fine path between idealism and realism. On the one hand, if a religious goal is set too low, how should we deal with our relentlessly ongoing and all-too-real life after the goal was alleged to have been realized? However, if a religious goal is set too high to be realized in any substantial way in one’s daily life, why should we intend to practice religions at all?

As a Ru scholar who has been involved in interreligious studies, especially on Ruism (Confucianism) and Christianity, for decades, I eventually come into my own terms with the aforementioned dilemma as follows: a religiously savvy human knows how to embrace a genuinely lofty ideal to which no reality can ever be adequate, while simultaneously being adept at tasting the sweetness of the ideal partially and momentarily so that no religious goal is made completely out of reach.¹ In other words, in the face of an unambiguously desirable religious ideal, we shall confide to ourselves confidently: yes, I have realized you and yet I just earnestly want more.

In the following, I indicate how I reach these terms through commentating on two key passages, respectively, from the Gospel of John and the *Mengzi*.

John 14:6–7, 12–14

⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” . . . ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”²

Jesus, in John 14, discusses his foreseen crucifixion with his disciples and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, to guide their spiritual journey after his departure. What fascinates me the most in the quoted passage is its exhaustive display of all possible temporal modes of salvation: Jesus’s ministries have been doing

what his disciples “from now on” witness in anticipation of where Jesus is “going to,” while simultaneously Jesus also timelessly proclaims that he is “the way and the truth and the life.” Past, now, future, and eternity; no single piece in the collage of time is left out.

Considering the traditional treatment of the theme of “eschaton” in the synoptic gospels and other chapters of the Gospel of John (such as John 16:16–33), what distinguishes John 14 is its projection that between Jesus’s reappearance to his disciples after his resurrection (past) and his final Parousia (future), believers in Jesus can “see” God and “do even greater works” under the guidance of the Paraclete here and now. Biblical scholars and Christian theologians call this a “realized eschatology” or “vertical eschatology,” in distinction from the eschaton construed elsewhere as a temporal end of history.³

The historical context of the composition of the Gospel of John also helps us to understand this new type of eschatology. In the face of its distressing expulsion from the synagogue, the earliest Johannine community asked poignantly: Why do I have to await the second coming of the Christ for so long?⁴ The furnished answer is that as long as Christians continually believe in the divinity of Jesus and do greater works under the guidance of the Holy Spirit here and now, they have already been saved to a certain extent in spite of the final salvation to come.

The great contemporary theologian who extrapolated the Johannine thesis of realized eschatology into a timely reflection on the political history of humanity in the twentieth century is Paul Tillich. For Tillich, it is unnecessary to interpret traditional Christian symbols of eschatology as “the last” in any temporal sense. Instead, the eschaton of human history that could be fragmentarily realized in the form of spiritual presence is the aim of history in the normative sense. Tillich believes there is no perfect temporal state of human history for which all humans should strive. Otherwise, the state of human history, concrete and finite, would be unduly considered infinite and thus become a false and demonic object of ultimate concern. According to Tillich, what humans should pursue is to fully devote themselves to realizing a better state of human society under the guidance of the already experienced ideal of spiritual presence. Nevertheless, since the realization of the ideal is always partial and fragmentary, we should acknowledge that even if a better state of human society can be accomplished, it would not be worshiped but criticized and, if necessary, rejected.⁵

In consideration of all the mentioned biblical commentaries and Tillich’s theology, I would welcome a Christian attitude toward its religious ideal vis-à-vis realities of everyday life as such: individually, we are able to reach our salvation partially and momentarily through embodying the divine agape of Jesus here and now, and yet the ultimate power and meaning thus obtained would propel us to do greater works on the earth without having to demand a temporal end of the world. Collectively, human society may display its admirable state in a certain historical period; however,

as measured by the once-realized religious ideal, none of these states can take on a final and ultimate mandate, which means humans shall always strive for a better world without having to anticipate a perfect utopia to come.

Mengzi 7B: 38.1-4

From Yao and Shun to Tang was more than five hundred years. So while Yu and Shun's minister Gao Yao understood the former sages by seeing them, Tang understood the former sages only by hearing about them. From Tang to King Wen was more than five hundred years. So while Tang's ministers Yi Yin and Lai Zhu understood the former sage by seeing him, King Wen understood the former sages only by hearing about them. From King Wen to Kongzi was more than five hundred years. So while King Wen's ministers Taigong Wang and San Yisheng understood the former sage by seeing him, Kongzi understood the former sages only by hearing about them. From Kongzi to the present time is a little more than one hundred years. It is not long from the era of a sage, and we are close to the home of a sage. Yet, is there no one? Then, isn't there indeed someone?⁶

The quoted words of Mengzi (Latinized traditionally as "Mencius") stand at the end of the eponymous *Mengzi*, one among the canonical Ruist *Four Books* since the eleventh century of ancient China. After narrating more than 1,500 years of history before him, Mengzi expressed his super confidence that he is the right person in his time to continue the lineage of the Way (道统, which starts from Yao and Shun, runs through Tang and King Wen, and arrives at Kongzi, also known as Confucius in the West) and to help to realize the ideal of "humane governance" (仁政) in a new era.⁷

Two points about the quote are worthy of note. First, Mengzi depicts human history as in a constant state of flux, with some periods more orderly and others more chaotic. No temporal end of history is projected, and those foregone good times are perceived as so exemplary as to earn generations' admiration. Although it is ultimately the support of common people that betokens the advent of a humane government, how to reharmonize a society and engineer the support is thought of as being up to the efforts of extraordinary human beings such as those mentioned sages and worthies.⁸

Second, it is remarkable that Mengzi believes the cultivation of sagehood does not rest upon whether one has a chance to "see" previous sages. Instead, all named sages after Yao and Shun just succeeded by "hearing" about sagehood. Since Mengzi had no chance to see Kongzi, he was confident about his own sagely learning because he was just able to hear about Kongzi as well. This resonates with Mengzi's other thesis, that every ordinary human can become a sage, which I analyze in more details in the following.

In other words, Mengzi's view on human history and the role of exemplary human individuals in it is amenable to being interpreted similarly to how we interpreted the Johannine-Tillichian view on eschatology: an ideal can be realized by

human society temporarily and partially; once realized, it would propel individuals to do greater works and, thus, to continually realize it without anticipating a temporal end of history.

However, different from the Christology in the Gospel of John, which professes no alternative path to God except through the faith in Jesus, the *Mengzi* claims a more humanistic and egalitarian ground for individual spiritual achievement. Mengzi says that as long as we routinely have a good sleep, and thus, keep a “heartmind” (心) sensitive to the interconnection of all beings in the world, it would be very likely for us to spontaneously react to a baby about to fall into a well with the feeling of fright and alarm.⁹ For Mengzi, this is a proof that human nature is innately commiserate and, hence, good. If deliberately accumulating the cosmic vital energies (氣, of which the air breathed during sleep is an instance) within one’s body using a method called “nourishing one’s oceanic vital-energies,” humans can feel the union of their individual life with the entire cosmos. As a consequence, humans would firmly retain their innate moral consciousness so as to thoroughly grasp which human sayings are right or wrong.¹⁰ Once enjoying this ecstatic moment of cosmic union, what remains for humans to do is to nurture and grow the incipient moral sprouts of humaneness (仁, of which the feeling of commiseration is an example) within human nature, and thus, continually overcome evil and do good through contributing to harmonious societies and humane governments.

Mengzi clearly realized that not every human being could be so dedicated to the moral self-cultivation as such. However, he also believed that every human can become a sage.¹¹ And the difference between a sage and a commoner lies just in that sages can persevere in correcting and perfecting themselves while inevitably making mistakes, whereas commoners would simply be unwilling to do so.¹² More importantly, Mengzi also clearly realized that a sole focus upon individual, moral self-cultivation cannot give rise to humane governance because there are factors necessary for humane governance such as laws, institutions, and interstate politics, the conditions of which do not entirely succumb to the efforts of any human individual.¹³ For instance, no matter how ardently the leader of a small state is dedicated to cultivating themselves and loving their people, the state might still risk being invaded by another more powerful state.¹⁴

Regarding these uncertain consequences of one’s dedication to being moral, Mengzi still professed triumphantly: first, he believed that the realization of humane governance relies upon the efforts of generations. Hence, leaders of varying states would simply need to “force themselves to do good” (強為善), and their descendants who inherit the same spirit would eventually get there.¹⁵ Second, the all-interconnecting cosmic vital energies buttress people’s morality as well as their health, just as the trope of good sleep and moral sprouts indicates above. Therefore, whenever individuals are trying to be moral, they remain content toward themselves, regardless of redeemable consequences in time.¹⁶

In a word, Mengzi’s message on ideal and reality can be illustrated as follows:

Individually, the ideal of moral cultivation (namely, the state of being humane while united with the entire cosmos) can be realized momentarily and partially; however, the ecstasy propels individuals to continually nurture and broaden their good human nature in an endless process of self-perfection. Collectively, human society was once realized as being humane with the efforts of admirable sages and worthies; nonetheless, human history would simply not cease. None of those previous ideal states were flawless utopias; hence, humans would just need to continually work up to better manifestations of the ideal down the road.

Summary

Let me summarize the major similarities and differences of the Gospel of John and the *Mengzi* on their religious visions of ideal versus reality.

- First, despite being grounded varyingly in the transcendent realm of being (one on God as an intentional supreme agent and another on Tian as a constantly generating cosmic field), both religious ideals imply a promise to all humanity: the agapeic love toward all human beings here and now and the humane governance through which all humanity thrive together.
- Second, a religious ideal is alleged by both to be capable of being realized partially and momentarily by a human individual here and now, whereas these moments motivate individuals to continually realize it more.

However, differences among the two are also visible.

- First, the theme of the temporal end of history is not completely abandoned by the Gospel of John, although with the Tillichian interpretation, its significance to the Christian way of life remains trivial. However, there is no such theme in the *Mengzi*, and no realization of the religious ideal of humaneness in the world is thought of by *Mengzi* as final and complete.
- Second, the momentary realization of the religious ideal in the Gospel of John exclusively relies upon the faith in the Christ. However, the ecstatic union with Tian is cogenerated by individual human efforts and the all-pervading cosmic vital energies in the *Mengzi*.

Enlightened by my interreligious reading of the Gospel of John and the *Mengzi*, I would like to conclude my view on ideal versus reality regarding any envisioned religious goal as follows: let us embrace neither perfectionism (namely, the demand of any reality as being perfect and flawless) nor the tendency of damnation (namely, to condemn human life as lacking any intrinsic potentiality toward goodness). A fine path is cleaved in the middle: a religiously fulfilled human would continually fight

for more manifestations of her ideal in the world and yet be able to enjoy the sweetness of that ideal momentarily and partially here and now.

Notes

1. “Confucianism” is a misnomer devised by early Christian missionaries in around the nineteenth century to refer to the Ru (儒, civilized human) tradition with a primary purpose of religious comparison and conversion, just as Islam was once called “Muhammadanism” in a similar historical context. A detailed explanation of the history on the nomenclature of “Confucianism” can be found in Tony Swain, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3–22; and Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 45–76. Following the reflective scholarly trend upon the nomenclature, and in line with my other publications, “Confucianism” will be written as “Ruism” or “the Ru tradition,” and “Confucian” or “Confucianist” will be written as “Ru” or “Ruist” in this chapter. I elaborate my view on how to do interreligious studies and comparative theology from the perspective of Ruism in Bin Song, “Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020): 92–113. The article argues that using a method of “seeded, open inclusivism,” Ru scholars can continually incorporate religious wisdom from varying traditions while keeping the commitment of the Ru tradition to comparative theology as a liberal art.

2. New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (used by permission; all rights reserved).

3. See Robert A. Hill, *An Examination and Critique of the Understanding of the Relationship between Apocalypticism and Gnosticism in Johannine Studies* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen University Press, 1997), 14.

4. See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 465.

5. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 307, 320, 358–59, and 373; and Paul Tillich, “The Political Meaning of Utopia,” in *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 177–78.

6. Bryan W. Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), 196–97. I have modified the quoted translation.

7. On Mengzi’s confidence, see Van Norden, 2B 13.5, p. 61.

8. Van Norden, 4A 9.1, p. 94.

9. Van Norden, 6A 8.1–8.2 and 2A 6.3–6.6, pp. 151–52 and pp. 46–47.

10. Van Norden, 2A 2.11–2.17, pp. 38–41.

11. Van Norden, 4B 31.1, p. 114.

12. Van Norden, 2B 9.4, p. 57.

13. Van Norden, 4A 1.3, p. 88.

14. Van Norden, 1B 14.1–15.3, pp. 30–31.

15. Van Norden, 1B 14.2–14.3, p. 30.

16. Van Norden, 4B 14.1, p. 106.